

**NDTAC ISSUE BRIEF:****Improving Conditions for  
Learning for Youth Who  
Are Neglected or  
Delinquent**

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## About the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk

This document was developed by the National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk (NDTAC), which is funded by a contract awarded by the U.S. Department of Education to the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) in Washington, DC. The mission of NDTAC is to improve educational programming for youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk of academic failure. NDTAC's mandates are to provide information, resources, and direct technical assistance to States and those who support or provide education to youth who are neglected or delinquent, develop a model and tools to assist States and providers with reporting data and evaluating their services, and serve as a facilitator to increase information sharing and peer-to-peer learning at State and local levels. For additional information on NDTAC, visit the Center's Web site at <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org>.

### Suggested Citation

Osher, D., Sidana, A., & Kelly, P. (2008). *Improving Conditions for Learning for Youth Who Are Neglected or Delinquent*. Washington, DC: National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk (NDTAC).

*The content of this document does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. This document was produced by NDTAC at the American Institutes for Research with funding from the Student Achievement and School Accountability Programs, OESE, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED -ESE -10 -O-0103. Permission is granted to reproduce this document.*

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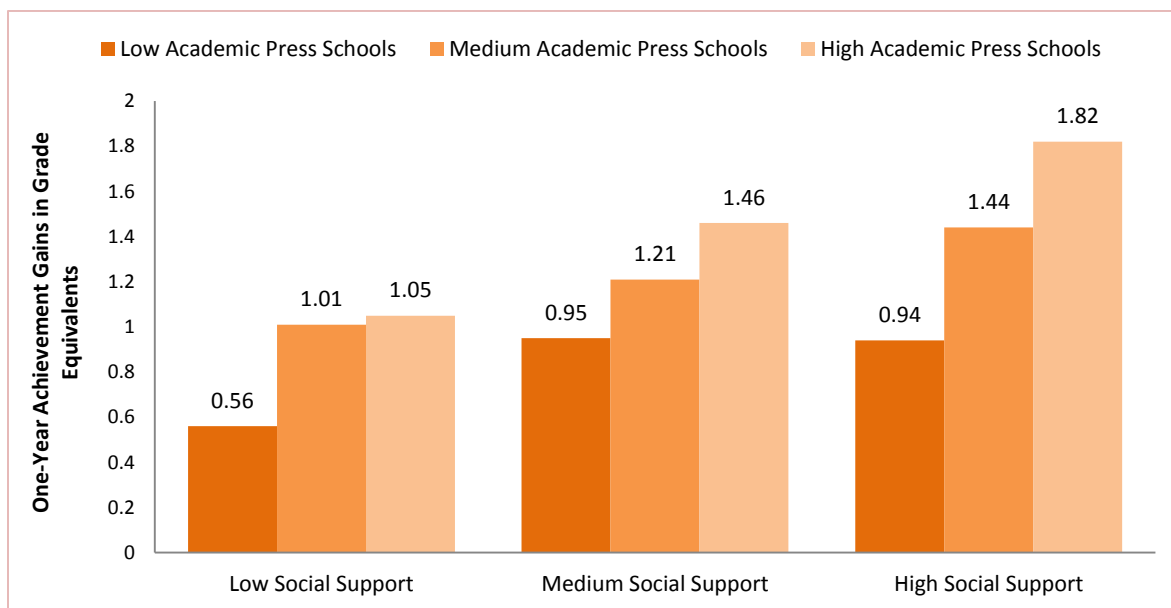
## Introduction

Learning is not just a cognitive process. Research shows that powerful social and emotional factors affect learning.<sup>1</sup> Some of these factors involve social relationships. These social factors include the teacher's relationship with the student, the student's relationship with other students, the teacher's and student's relationships with the student's family and with staff, the overall climate of the student's learning environment, and the support provided to teachers and other staff to provide a caring and supportive environment. Other factors are individual and often involve emotional matters. These emotional factors include the student's motivation; sense of self and of ability to succeed, both in life and academically; mental and physical wellness; and ability to manage his or her own emotions and relationships with teachers and other students.

These social and emotional factors influence students' abilities to attend to learning, their ability to direct their learning, and their engagement in learning activities. These factors also influence teachers' abilities to connect with, challenge, and support their students. For example, it is hard for students to attend to learning if they are angry at a teacher's sarcasm or worried about aggression by fellow students. Similarly, if students cannot handle the frustration of not succeeding the first time they try something or think that they will be teased by the people around them if they do not succeed, they may not persevere with academic tasks or take the risks necessary to learn. By providing students with support that addresses their social and emotional needs and building strong social and emotional conditions for learning, staff in neglected or delinquent (N or D) settings—as well as other schools—can help improve learning outcomes that cannot be addressed through academic remediation alone.

Social and emotional factors are important for all students. However, they are particularly important for students served in N or D settings—students who often come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students of color, and students with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities. Research suggests that it is hard to improve academic outcomes for these students, both individually and collectively, without addressing the social and emotional barriers to learning that they face. For example, research in low-performing schools in Chicago that "turned around" showed that the highest level of turn-around took place in schools that combined a strong academic focus with equally strong doses of student support.<sup>2</sup> Similar research in Alaska and New York, as well as research on national data sets, suggests that learning and academic performance improve when the conditions for learning improve.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 demonstrates the dual impact of social support and academic press.

**Figure 1: Biggest Reading Gains in Schools That Combine High Levels of Student Social Support and School Academic Press**



Source: Lee, V., Smith, J., Perry, T., & Smylie, M. A. (1999). *Social support, academic press, and student achievement: A view from the middle grades in Chicago*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, Chicago Annenberg.

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system typically lag two or more years behind their peers in basic academic skills, experience learning disabilities and mental and behavioral problems in much higher proportions than their peers,<sup>4</sup> and often lack the social-emotional skills necessary for dealing with the challenges that they face.<sup>5</sup> To help these youth advance academically, the social-emotional factors that create effective conditions for learning must be addressed. The four social and emotional conditions for learning are:

**Research shows that when basic psychological needs (such as the need to belong and the need to be physically secure) are fulfilled, students are more apt to commit to the school community's norms and rules.<sup>8</sup>**

- **Safety.** Learners must be, and feel, safe. Safety involves emotional as well as physical safety—for example, being safe from sarcasm and ridicule.
- **Support.** Learners must feel connected to teachers and the learning setting, must have access to appropriate support, and must be aware of and know how to access the support.
- **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).** Learners need to learn to manage their emotions and relationships positively and be surrounded by peers who also have socially responsible behavior.
- **Engagement and Challenge.** Learners youth need to be actively engaged in learning endeavors that are relevant to them and that enable them to develop the skills and capacities to reach positive life goals.

These four conditions are interdependent and reinforce each other.<sup>6</sup> For example, teachers who have positive relationships with students will find it is easier to engage students<sup>7</sup> and to develop their students' social and emotional skills. Similarly, social and emotional learning contributes to safe and challenging learning environments. In this technical issue brief, we explore how each of the

four conditions for learning applies to children and youth in or at risk of being placed in juvenile justice facilities or programs for neglected youth. We also introduce approaches that may help facilities increase the presence of these conditions and provide a number of "additional resources" within each section for further exploration of research and practical applications. Finally, we discuss how to assess the social and emotional strengths of students and the conditions for learning in N or D settings.

## Safety

Safety encompasses freedom from *physical* harm (such as peer violence and substance abuse) and threats of physical harm as well as freedom from *emotional* harm (such as teasing and relational bullying). This includes both actual and perceived levels of risk, with an emphasis on the condition as it is experienced by the student. Individuals in a safe school environment are able to share a sense of mutual trust and respect. Additionally, a safe school environment fulfills students' core psychological needs, including the need to belong, be autonomous, and be physically secure. Research shows that when basic psychological needs such as these are fulfilled, students are more apt to align with and commit to the school community's norms and rules.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, evidence also indicates that *unsafe* school environments are associated with higher levels of negative risk-taking behavior and disengagement from school.<sup>9</sup>

Many factors undermine safety and the perception of safety in N or D settings. These can include poor relationships among racial and ethnic groups within the facility, gang rivalry between and among students, reactive and punitive approaches on the part of institutional staff, the lack of positive behavioral supports, and untreated, undertreated, or poorly treated mental health disorders such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Mental health needs are particularly important for schools that work with children and youth who are neglected or delinquent.<sup>10</sup> For example, a study of a random, stratified sample of 1,172 males and 657 females ages 10-18 who were arrested and detained in Cook County, Illinois, found that nearly two-thirds of males and three-quarters of females met diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a randomized study of youth from all 15 of Maryland's juvenile facilities found that 53 percent met diagnostic criteria for a psychiatric disorder and that two-thirds of those with any mental health diagnosis had more than one mental or substance use diagnosis.<sup>12</sup> The needs of neglected children and youth are no different. A national study of the prevalence of mental health disorders among children and youth in the child welfare system found that 50 percent of these children and youth had mental health problems.<sup>13</sup>

Multiple strategies can be used by administrators as first steps to increase levels of safety within a setting that serves youth who are N or D, including mental health screening; the transfer of accurate personal and academic records (at entry and exit) that provide a comprehensive view of a student's history and needs; appropriate student placement/separation that takes into consideration physical size, gender, and gang affiliation; the application of positive behavioral approaches;<sup>14</sup> and

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- **SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING.** Learners need to learn to manage their emotions and relationships positively and be surrounded by peers who also have socially responsible behavior.
- **ENGAGEMENT AND CHALLENGE.** Youth need to be actively engaged in learning endeavors that are relevant to them and that enable them to develop the skills and capacities to reach positive life goals.

reducing—and ideally preventing—the use of punitive measures such as restraints. These strategies are further addressed below.

### Mental Health Screening

Many youth may arrive at N or D settings with unidentified mental health needs. This is particularly the case for youth of color, as research suggests that they have had less access to mental health

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screening, assessment, and intervention. For example, Black youth are less likely than their White counterparts to be referred to treatment centers and more likely to be referred to juvenile justice settings.<sup>15</sup>

### Accurate Records Transfer and Intake Screening

Administrators can prioritize efforts and create policies to ensure that records transferred to and from their facility at student entry and exit are as accurate and complete as possible. To address basic student needs with the proper services (thus contributing to a student's sense of personal security) and minimize disruption of service delivery during transition, facilities should receive records that include at least the following information:

- Mental health history, *including suicide risk*
- Substance abuse history
- Math and reading levels
- Records of full academic data, including assessment results, transcripts, and report cards

Information from student records should be used in conjunction with intake screening and ongoing assessment to create comprehensive and up-to-date profiles for students entering facilities. Because students typically leave facilities with little or no notice, it is important that their records be updated frequently so that the documentation they bring to their next placement is accurate. Assessments should be culturally competent and identify both strengths and needs. (See the ["Assessing the Social and Emotional Strengths and Needs of Students and the Social and Emotional Conditions of Learning in Your School"](#) section of this document for more information on strengths-based assessments.)

In addition to using information from student records and intake screenings to inform decisions about the proper provision of services (such as mental health services, mentoring, or suicide prevention programs), it is also important to share with a student's teachers and classroom aides, as appropriate, any non-academic information that may facilitate teaching and learning. Such non-academic information might focus on specific student strengths or needs. For example, information on needs might include whether the student has any cognitive disabilities that affect his or her ability to process information, whether the student recently experienced a traumatic event, or whether the student is affiliated with a specific gang that may have a prominent presence—or rivalry—in the facility.

### Appropriate Youth Placement/Separation

Although it is common practice among facilities to separate youth of differing physical size to help avoid safety issues, decisions about youth placement should also take into consideration gang affiliation and gender issues. It is important that staff and faculty learn about and be able to identify local gang signs; if present in large numbers, members of competing gangs may need to be separated. Separation on the basis of gender is also a vital first step in creating a secure environment for girls, many of whom have experienced rape, molestation, and other sexual and

physical abuse. In fact, approximately 3 out of 4 girls in the juvenile justice system report a history of abuse, and at least 50 percent of these young women meet the diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>16</sup> Attempts at suicide are also higher among girls (who are more likely to internalize negative feelings and to resort to self-harm or substance abuse) than among boys.<sup>17</sup>

### **Use of Restraints**

Because youth who are neglected or delinquent may be survivors of past trauma (particularly female adolescents in the system), the use of punitive control measures such as restraints significantly takes away from students' experiences of safety, and may even retraumatize victims. Using these types of measures should be minimized as much as possible. The National Mental Health Association's position statement on the treatment of confined youth who have mental health needs states that, "When restraint must be used to prevent injury to self or others, there should be stringent procedural safeguards, limitations on time, periodic reviews and documentation. Generally, these techniques should be used only in response to extreme threats to life or safety and after other less restrictive control techniques have been tried and failed."<sup>18</sup>



## Additional Resources on Safety

### Mental Health/Screening

- [Blueprint for Change: A Comprehensive Model for the Identification and Treatment of Youth With Mental Health Needs in Contact With the Juvenile Justice System](#) (PDF)—This model guide is a conceptual and practical framework for juvenile justice and mental health systems to use when developing strategies, policies, and services aimed at improving mental health services for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.
- [In Harm's Way: A Primer in Detention Suicide Prevention](#) (PDF)—This document describes a local model for suicide prevention in juvenile detention and residential facilities, and is meant to provide those who work in such settings with information on lessons learned.
- [NDTAC Presentation on Mental Health Screening and Assessment](#) (MS Word) — This presentation describes why mental health screenings are needed, how they work, and which tests are appropriate for youth in N or D settings.
- National Mental Health Association's (NMHA) [Principles for Treatment of Confined Students With Mental Health Needs](#) — This paper highlights nine principles that should be taken into consideration to meet the mental health needs of youth in the juvenile justice system.
- [Screening and Assessing Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders Among Youth in the Juvenile Justice System: A Resource Guide for Practitioners](#) — This resource presents information on instruments that can be used to screen and assess youth for mental health- and substance use-related disorders at various stages of the juvenile justice process. The guide includes profiles of more than 50 instruments, guidelines for selecting instruments, and best practice recommendations for diverse settings and situations.
- [Suicide Prevention and Juvenile Justice Resources](#) (PDF) — An annotated list of resources for suicide prevention in the juvenile justice setting. The list is organized in the context of the public health approach to suicide prevention. Links are included if the resource is available electronically.
- [Suicide Prevention in Juvenile Facilities](#) — This National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) publication on suicide prevention includes a list of the critical components of a suicide prevention policy.

### Accurate Records Transfer and Intake Screening

- [Legislation and Interagency Relationships Aid in the Successful Transfer of Student Records](#)—This brief discusses how legislation and interagency relationships work together to aid in student transitions.
- [NDTAC's Self Study Toolkit: Records Transfer Module](#)—This module helps administrators determine how successful their facility is at transferring student records.

### Use of Restraints and Seclusion

- [The Alliance to Prevent Restraint, Aversive Interventions, and Seclusion \(APRAIS\)](#)—APRAIS was founded by members of the Nation's leading education, research, and advocacy organizations to protect children from abuse in their schools, treatment programs, and residential facilities. APRAIS works to identify the laws, regulations, and loopholes that permit the use of aversive interventions, nonemergency restraints, and seclusion. This Web site provides a parent guide as well as other information and materials on aversive procedures, seclusion, and nonemergency restraint.
- [National Coordinating Center to Reduce and Eliminate the Use of Seclusion and Restraint](#)—This Web site provides an overview of the National Coordinating Center to Reduce and Eliminate the Use of Seclusion and Restraint, whose purpose is to promote the implementation and evaluation of best practice approaches to preventing and reducing the use of seclusion and restraint in mental health settings.
- [A Roadmap to Seclusion and Restraint Free Mental Health Services for Persons of All Ages](#)—This training curriculum emphasizes the importance of creating cultural change within organizations to impact seclusion and restraint reduction. It outlines best practices in the use of trauma-informed care and other aspects to support resiliency and recovery of

people with mental illnesses while avoiding seclusion and restraint practices that can harm rather than help.

- [Plan for a Continuum of Community Based Services for Female Status Offenders and Delinquents](#) (PDF)—This 2005 report by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families makes recommendations for gender-responsive policies that address the needs of girls involved in the juvenile justice system. The report also touches upon the negative impact of using restraint and seclusion with female juvenile offenders.

## General Resources for Safety in Schools

- [Early Warning, Timely Response](#) (PDF)—Prepared for the Departments of Education and Justice at the request of the White House, this guide presents a brief summary of the research on violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools. It describes the early and imminent warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors and details action steps for preventing violence, intervening and getting help for troubled children, and responding to school violence.
- [Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide](#) (PDF)—Prepared for the Departments of Education and Justice, this guide helps schools develop and implement a comprehensive violence prevention and response plan, which can be customized to fit each school's particular strengths.
- [Addressing Student Problem Behavior](#)—This online tool is a set of three user-friendly guides to functional behavioral assessment and related interventions.

## Support

Support includes the availability of help to meet the student's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. Support also refers to the student's sense of connection and attachment to the adults in the facility and of being cared about and treated well and respectfully by them. Optimizing the experience of support requires creating caring connections with adults who can offer encouragement, nurturing, and are significantly involved in the life of the student—even one high-quality supportive relationship with an adult early in high school, particularly for students of color, has been shown to have dramatic effects.<sup>19</sup>

When high expectations are emphasized in conjunction with support, the result, typically, is an increase in academic achievement; this seems to be especially true for students of color and students who are at risk of academic failure.<sup>20</sup> For example, adolescent perceptions of connections with teachers have been shown to predict academic growth in mathematics,<sup>21</sup> and teacher nurturance has been found to be the most consistent *negative* predictor of poor academic performance and problematic social behavior.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in another study, teachers who had high-quality relationships with their students had 31 percent fewer discipline problems, rule violations, and related problems over a year's time than teachers who did not.<sup>23</sup>

**When teachers have strong content knowledge and are willing to adapt their pedagogies to meet student needs, adding good teacher-student relationships and strong encouragement to the mix may be key. It may help Black and Hispanic students seek help more readily, engage their studies deeply, and ultimately, overcome skill gaps that are due in substantial measure to past and present disparities in family-background advantages and associated social inequities.**

**-Ron Ferguson**

***What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools* (p.4)<sup>26</sup>**

Many youth in N or D facilities view adults as being uncaring, manipulative, and punitive. Although this perception may not be accurate, it nevertheless affects their ability to learn from the adults whom they encounter. Caring support for these youth may be even more crucial than for other adolescents, yet is less accessible. In addition, N or D settings must struggle with the risk of peer contagion—the negative peer influences that may arise from grouping deviant youth together. In fact, research shows that “a third of the positive effects of juvenile justice interventions are offset by adverse effects of interventions administered in a deviant peer-group context.”<sup>24</sup> The development of caring relationships between staff and students can reduce this risk.

The issue is not just hiring caring staff, but also creating capacity to care.<sup>25</sup> Capacity building involves training and support.<sup>26</sup> Staff training should involve the entire staff—not just the education staff—and be reinforced by coaching, supervision, and programs such as positive behavioral interventions and support. Focused training and support can enhance staff:

- Cultural and linguistic competency
- Understanding of their ability to use positive behavioral approaches
- Understanding of how learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders affect student behavior
- Expectations for student success
- Ability to identify student strengths

At the same time, training and support can reduce:

- Deficit-oriented approaches to students
- Reactive and punitive approaches to students that create or escalate problem behavior

Finally, teacher training should also have a combined emphasis on content, pedagogy, and relationships.<sup>27</sup>

One of the ways that supportive relationships between students and staff members in facilities may be enhanced is through a structured mentoring process. Research shows that successful mentoring programs match mentors and mentees, support the mentoring process, and are at least 1 year long.<sup>28</sup> When implementing a mentoring program at a facility, program planners should also consider including mentoring in the aftercare plan developed for youth being released from the facility.

For students who have mental health or other special education needs, support also involves appropriately addressing their needs in an effective and caring manner. Effective approaches tend to be strengths based, individualized, youth driven, and culturally and linguistically appropriate and

**Research shows that successful mentoring programs match mentors and mentees, support the mentoring process, and are at least 1 year long.<sup>28</sup>**

competent. Frequently, such approaches combine cognitive and behavioral components with the development of positive relationships between the student and the individual(s) providing the intervention. In the case of girls and young women, effective support must address the impact of trauma and abuse. Online resources for addressing mental health needs include the [Technical Assistance Partnership for Child and Family Mental Health \(TAP\) Web site](#), and the [Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice \(CECP\) Web site](#), which includes useful information on youth-guided approaches, cultural competence, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and effective mental health treatments.

## Additional Resources for Support

- [NDTAC's Mentoring Toolkit: Resources for Developing Programs for Incarcerated Youth](#)—This toolkit provides a complete list of considerations for developing a mentoring program.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) [Resources on Mentoring](#), including [model programs](#).
- [NDTAC Article: The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\) Project in Pennsylvania](#)—This article details the PTSD curriculum, which is intended to nurture experiences of safety, bonding, and other positive conditions for the 70 to 90 percent of girls who enter the juvenile justice system with a history of abuse. These teenage girls typically also suffer from any of a host of mental health disorders, including PTSD.
- [Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness](#) (PDF)—This one-page declaration, based on empirical evidence, aims to form the basis for creating school and classroom environments where all students are engaged and feel part of the educational experience.
- [School Connectedness: Improving Students' Lives](#) (PDF)—This report, prepared by the Military Child Initiative at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, distills research and practical advice on how to promote connectedness.
- [Safe, Drug-Free, and Effective Schools for ALL Students: What Works!](#)—Prepared for the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, this study reports on schools in three communities where parents, teachers, administrators, and students work together to make the schools safe and effective learning environments for all students by providing a caring and supportive environment that includes positive behavioral supports and social emotional learning.
- [Deviant Peer Influences in Intervention and Public Policy for Youth](#) (PDF)—A report published by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) that examines the impact delinquent peers have on one another and discusses related policy options for programs serving youth in placement.

## Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which children and adults learn to understand and manage their emotions and relationships. This includes developing (or enhancing) the ability to demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, value and address diversity, and handle challenging situations effectively. SEL creates a foundation for academic achievement, maintenance of good physical and mental health, parenting, citizenship, and productive employment. SEL helps create a positive school

**Social and emotional learning creates a foundation for academic achievement, maintenance of good physical and mental health, parenting, citizenship, and productive employment.**

environment. If there are positive conditions for learning, and the capacity for SEL is built, then the result is greater capacity and engagement on the part of the children. There is less problematic behavior and better academic results.

The development of SEL competencies is important for child and adolescent development, and these competencies

form the basis of a student's ability to respond to "academic frustrations, inappropriate adult behavior, and antisocial peer behavior."<sup>29</sup> SEL contributes to successful academic outcomes, safe environments, and the ability of children and youth to make successful transitions. Research syntheses suggest the importance of SEL to academic achievement. For example, a recent meta-

analysis of 207 SEL interventions in schools that applied the What Works Clearinghouse Improvement Index showed that the improvement index for those students who received the intervention was 11 percentage points higher than for the comparison-group students. Table 1 provides the effect sizes for different outcomes in this meta-analysis.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 1: Meta-Analysis of School-Based SEL Programs**

Outcome Area	Post N	Effect Size
Social-emotional skills	84	.61*
Academic achievement tests	27	.32*
Disciplinary actions	26	.33*
School bonding	24	.32*
Positive social behavior	96	.25*

Effect sizes denoted with \* are statistically significant,  $p < .05$

Analyses of the impact of effective SEL interventions on academics show that that they affect school-related attitudes, behavior, and performance.<sup>31</sup>

*Improved attitudes* include:

- A stronger sense of community (bonding),
- More academic motivation and higher aspirations, and
- More positive attitudes toward school.

Resulting *behavioral improvements* include:

- Understanding the consequences of behavior,
- Coping effectively with school stressors,
- More classroom participation,
- Greater effort to achieve,
- Fewer hostile negotiations at school,
- Fewer suspensions, and
- Increased engagement.

Resulting *performance improvements* include:

- Increased grades and achievement,
- Increases in being on track to graduate, and
- Fewer dropouts.

SEL is equally important in reducing problem behavior. For example, a meta-analysis of 165 studies of school-based prevention found that self-control or social competency programming that employed cognitive-behavioral and behavioral instructional methods consistently was effective in

reducing dropout rate, nonattendance, conduct problems, and substance use.<sup>32</sup> SEL is of particular relevance in improving outcomes for children and youth in N or D programs and settings. These young people often have poor social communication skills and lack proper anger management and conflict resolution capacities.<sup>33</sup> Studies by Kenneth Dodge and John Lochman have shown that aggressive youth often have a distorted perception of aggression in that they over-perceive aggression in peers and under-perceive their own aggressive behaviors.<sup>34</sup> Other experts have suggested that many youth view violence as a functional and commonplace solution for solving problems.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, a relationship exists between SEL and safety. For example, an examination of SEL and safety scores for all Chicago high schools found a strong correlation (.72) between safety and SEL scales.<sup>36</sup> Surveys of employers also suggest the importance of SEL in the workplace. Eight of the 16 competencies that the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills deemed as skills necessary for high school graduates or individuals entering the workforce relate to SEL: self-esteem, sociability, integrity/honesty, problem-solving, self-management, responsibility, listening, and decisionmaking.<sup>37</sup>

If we want to help youth who are neglected or delinquent deal with the psychosocial challenges that they face, we must pay special attention to the development of social skills and conflict resolution techniques. By teaching students about problem-solving, decision-making, and resisting negative social pressures, educators can help students combat psychosocial obstacles to learning. One strategy used to teach students to resist negative social pressures is social resistance training. Social resistance training has proved valuable in helping youth to steer clear of alcohol, tobacco, and more dangerous drugs. This type of training places emphasis on the development of social persuasion techniques that enable youth to avoid risky behaviors by turning the social situation around in their favor.<sup>38</sup> Teaching social persuasion techniques involves the modeling and rehearsing of proper refusal techniques. Examples of program interventions are [LifeSkills Training](#) and [Say It Straight](#). In the area of conflict resolution, it is important to start changing youths' paradigm of violence. Effective conflict resolution and problem-solving strategies help youth realize that violence begets more violence. Successful conflict resolution programs have lowered the level of violence in schools, juvenile facilities, and communities at large.<sup>39</sup> View the OJJDP Model Programs Guide for more information on [Conflict Resolution/Interpersonal Skills](#).

Although teaching specific social skills is important, it is just as important to teach general SEL skills. These skills are:

- **Self Awareness.** Recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and limitations
- **Self Management.** Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals
- **Social Awareness.** Showing understanding and empathy for others
- **Relationship Skills.** Forming positive relationships, working in teams, and dealing effectively with conflict
- **Responsible Decision making.** Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior

The most effective educational strategies address these psychosocial issues with a multipronged approach, which teaches and models skills, provides opportunities to practice the skills and coaching on how the skills are being implemented, and creates opportunities to practice, adapt, and generalize these skills in natural settings. Service Learning, for example, is an effective method of experiential learning for youth who are neglected or delinquent that places the student in an active role in his or her community. Service learning projects may involve such activities as creating books

for children or cards for the elderly or participating in community-service projects. However, to be valuable, a service learning program must meet four characteristics:

- it addresses actual community needs
- it is coordinated in collaboration with school and community, which in the case of secure neglected or delinquent settings could include the institution
- it is integrated into each student's academic curriculum
- it allocates a specific time for the student to reflect on the experience

When youth who have encountered challenges in their lives engage in service learning, they can reap a number of benefits, including a more positive self-image, reduced stress and feelings of helplessness, self-respect and responsibility, and a sense of reclamation.<sup>40</sup>

Children and youth who face more intense SEL challenges may require more intensive approaches if they are to change negative thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. An effective approach in this case may be cognitive-behavioral therapy/treatment (CBT). CBT is a problem-focused approach that helps youth identify and change the beliefs, thoughts, and patterns of behavior that contribute to their problems. CBT combines two very effective kinds of psychotherapy—*cognitive therapy* and *behavioral therapy*. Cognitive therapy concentrates on thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs. It helps people recognize and change faulty or maladaptive thinking patterns. The [OJJDP Model Programs Guide](#) provides the example of a young person who is having trouble completing a math problem: The student may repetitively think that he or she is stupid, not a good student, and can't do math. Students can learn to replace these thoughts with more realistic thoughts such as "This problem is difficult; I'll ask for help."<sup>41</sup> Behavioral therapy concentrates on changing behaviors and environments that maintain problematic behaviors. Successful programs that have implemented CBT specifically root out negative thoughts and "reinforce positive behavior by using CBT strategies delivered by teachers, mentors, tutors, peers, and school staff."<sup>42</sup> CBT techniques can be applied at various levels: at an individualized level (e.g., personalized interaction with a teacher); at a classroom level (see [The Incredible Years](#)); at a schoolwide level (see [School Transitional Environmental Program](#)); and at the community level (see [Movimiento Ascendencia](#) [Upward Movement]).<sup>43</sup>



## Additional Resources for Social Emotional Learning

- The [Starr Commonwealth](#) program is a model program that combines SEL approaches with an emphasis on restorative justice.
- The [OJJDP Model Programs Guide](#) offers a number of strategies and approaches to SEL programming.
- [Aggression Replacement Training® \(ART®\)](#)—ART is a multimodal psychoeducational intervention designed to alter the behavior of chronically aggressive adolescents and young children. The goal of ART is to improve social skill competence, anger control, and moral reasoning.
- [Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Programs](#) (PDF)—In an easy-to-read "consumer report" fashion, this guide distills what is known about effective SEL instruction and provides information on effective programs for the classroom that promote SEL. It discusses the associated costs, the grades covered, the level of rigorous evidence, which schools are most effective at teaching SEL skills, and which promote professional development for teachers.
- [What Works in Character Education](#) (PDF) describes effective character education practices.
- [Character and Academics: What Good Schools Do](#)—This Phi Delta Kappan article describes effective approaches to character education.

## Engagement and Challenge

Engagement involves energizing a student's interest in the educational process. Engagement is multidimensional. It has academic, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological dimensions, which are enhanced when the other conditions for learning are present.<sup>44</sup> Engagement is enhanced when learning builds upon student strengths, addresses the student's interests, and is perceived by the student as being relevant to his or her future. Culturally competent approaches that address individual learning needs and provide an appropriate balance between challenge and support can enhance engagement.<sup>45</sup>

Challenge involves setting and promoting high expectations for all students, connecting the curriculum to the larger picture and the outside world, fighting boredom, and encouraging the intellectual curiosity of all students.<sup>46</sup> For students to be engaged and feel challenged in their academic setting, they must "experience a climate of high expectations for achievement (and related school behavior) that is shared and reinforced by other students, their friends, their teachers, and their family."<sup>47</sup> Students must be challenged with high expectations, must be personally motivated, must feel that school is connected to larger life goals, and must be given tangible academic opportunities.

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Challenge should be of special interest in neglected and delinquent settings because best practices as well as expectations in N or D education now stress the importance of providing youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at risk of educational failure with a rigorous and challenging learning environment, in which:



- The curriculum in all academic areas focuses on "comprehension and complex, meaningful problem-solving tasks," so that youth enhance their cognitive skills.
- The curriculum consists of skills than can be *easily* applied to real-life situations.
- The curriculum emphasizes team-based approaches, e.g., cooperative learning, tutoring among peers, and "team problem-solving activities."
- The curriculum highlights "metacognition"—the ability of a student to perceive his or her strengths and weaknesses.
- The curriculum employs materials in all subject areas that are based on "life and social skills competencies."<sup>48</sup>

Many authors have pointed to the necessity of fostering a "creative, exciting" learning environment that is tailored to students' interests.<sup>49</sup> Student learning can be enhanced by personalization, culturally responsive instruction, active learning, experiential learning, identifying and building upon student knowledge and interests, service learning, access to rigorous learning opportunities, and the creative use of technology to scaffold learning and to promote higher-order thinking.<sup>50</sup> To create an enriching learning environment, many organizational features should be present:

- Strong academic leadership
- A safe school environment
- Adequate space and equipment
- A variety of print and non-print instructional materials
- Technology
- Library services
- Measurable performance outcomes
- Instructional support services<sup>51</sup>

It is also crucial that there school-to-work linkages exist and that a strong emphasis be placed on vocational training. Studies have shown an inverse correlation between vocational and employability skills and recidivism among youth members.<sup>52</sup> As an example of one such program that links school to work, the Smyrna Beach Employability Skill Training teaches students applicable job skills by having them participate in a school-based business, which is set up to mirror an actual place of employment. Students engage in the production, promotion, and sales of their products, and in return they receive a paycheck.<sup>53</sup>

## Additional Resources for Engagement and Challenge

- [Making the Juvenile Justice–Workforce System Connection](#) (PDF) stresses the importance of developing employability skills to reduce recidivism rates for youth who are neglected or delinquent.
- [Engaging Schools, Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn](#)—This book, which can be searched and read online, was prepared by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences Board on Children, Youth and Families. It summarizes the best research on engagement and motivation.
- [Creating Culturally Responsive Schools](#) describes approaches supported by the research that educators can employ to promote culturally responsive education.
- [Center for Implementing Technology in Education](#) (CITEd) supports leadership at State and local education agencies to integrate instructional technology for all students to achieve high educational standards.
- [Techmatrix](#)—A powerful tool for finding assistive and learning technology products for students who have special needs.
- [The Access Center](#)—The mission of the Access Center is to provide technical assistance that strengthens State and local capacity to help students who have disabilities effectively learn in the general education curriculum.
- [National Center on Student Progress Monitoring](#)—The center provides technical assistance to States and districts and disseminates information about progress monitoring practices proven to work in different academic content areas (grades K-5).
- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)—Response to Intervention (RTI) can help teachers maximize student achievement through early identification of learning or behavioral difficulties, the provision of appropriate evidence-based interventions, and the monitoring of student progress based on achievement and other performance data.

## Assessing the Needs of Students and Schools

Needs should be assessed at both the individual and institutional levels. Individual assessments will help you develop interventions for individual students and monitor their progress. Schoolwide assessment will help you identify the array of schoolwide, group, and individual strategies you may need to develop and will help you monitor schoolwide progress.

### Individual Assessments

Individual assessments have traditionally employed deficit-oriented instruments. During the past decades, there has been movement toward employing strengths-based assessments. One of the most researched measures is the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS).<sup>54</sup> The BERS is a 52-item scale normed on a racially and ethnically representative national sample of 2,176 children without disabilities and 861 children with emotional and behavioral disorders, ages 5 to 18. It is completed by adults familiar with the youth and measures emotional and behavioral strengths for five empirically derived factors: interpersonal strengths (e.g., accepts "no" for an answer), family involvement (e.g., participates in family activities), intrapersonal strengths (e.g., demonstrates self-confidence), school functioning (e.g., completes school tasks on time), and affective strengths (e.g., accepts a hug).

### Schoolwide Assessments

Schoolwide assessments collect information on how students experience the school climate. A number of reputable school climate assessments exist. Effective surveys should have valid and reliable items and scales. They can be administered on a schoolwide basis or to a sample of students, and their data can be disaggregated to see how subgroups of students are experiencing the school environment. To maximize the honesty of student responses, it is important that student confidentiality be ensured.

One well researched instrument for measuring the conditions for learning, initially developed for use in Chicago, is now being used in a number of U.S. districts. Both a middle grades version and a high school version of this survey are available (see the American Institutes for Research Conditions for Learning survey information on the SSSTA [Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center] [School Climate Measurement Web page](#)). The surveys are administered annually in elementary and high schools in Cleveland and Syracuse. This type of data could be used when developing State N or D report cards. The data from the survey are also reported back to schools, in both an aggregated and disaggregated manner for continuous improvement by school improvement teams, who review the scores to identify needs and successes.

Other school climate measures also may be found on SSSTA's [School Climate Measurement Web page](#).

## Conclusion

To create a positive learning environment for all students, it is important to assess and enhance the four social and emotional conditions for learning. Students must feel both physically and emotionally **safe** from harm. They must feel that the adults in their lives care about them and are there to **support** them. Students also have to be equipped with the **social and emotional** skills to deal with their behaviors and actions in nonviolent, mature, and reasoned ways. Finally, it is important that all students feel **engaged and challenged** in their learning environment, with high expectations set for all. Only when the four conditions for learning are addressed can a comprehensive plan for student learning be truly effective. Moreover, creating such a plan requires buy-in from key stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, and members of the community. A successful plan also requires a long-term commitment by teachers, facility staff, administrators, and policymakers. With such a plan, every child can be given the opportunity to learn in the best learning environment possible—an environment that is supported strongly by effective conditions for learning.

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